Published by:
ODB
BISS
Belarus Digest

Belarus Headlines

Issue X
October 2012

Analysis

European Dialogue on Modernisation: A Model Kit
Although the European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarus has just kicked off, it has already faced a barrage of criticism from both Belarusian and European experts. Nevertheless, it has a potential for drawing attention to Belarusian issues in the European political scene....P.3

Belarusian Diplomacy Gets New Face
After a tense summer of relations with the EU, Belarus' leadership has undertaken a number of changes in its foreign policy. Uladzimir Makey was appointed the new foreign minister....P.6

Sad Elections in Belarus
The European Union still views the elections in Belarus as an opportunity for change and as a test for Minsk, which will either be rewarded by a lifting of the sanctions or penalised by their tightening....P.7

Research

The First Issue of BISS Political Media Barometer: Cooperation for Development....P.9
Political Business Cycle in Belarus or Political Economy of Trust in President....P.10

Current Activities

Contact Making Seminars and Information Meetings for Belarusian CSOs Take Place in Minsk....P.11
Belarusian Transport Experts Learn from Lithuanian Experience....P.12
Ways to Improve Public Transportation in Belarus Discussed in Minsk....P.12

Most Polpular on BD

Summaries of the most popular articles on Belarus Digest.....P.13

Unknown Belarus

Famous Belarusians of the World

The Bear of Belarus
Alexander Medved' is considered by most to be the best freestyle wrestler of all time. He was the first person ever to win three gold Olympic medals in this sport..... P.14

Contact Info

bh@democraticbelarus.eu

Square de Meeûs 37
1000 Brussels



Belarus' BATE Barysau Celebrates its Deserved Victory over Bayern Munich. 2 October 2012, Minsk, Belarus. Photo by: belarus.by. This victory brought a surge of patriotism throughout the country. For the first time in many years broadcasting of the interview with Aliaksandr Lukashenka was shifted in favour of the match BATE-Valencia.

Main News

The Council of the European Union decided to prolong the existing restrictive measures on Belarus until 31 October 2013 due to the fact that not all political prisoners have been released and the lack of improvement with regards to the respect for human rights, the rule of law and democratic principles. However, the Council noted that restrictive measures 'remain open and under constant review'. When speaking at a news conference in Luxembourg after the October 15 talks the EU foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, called parliamentary election in Belarus "yet another missed opportunity to conduct elections in line with international standards". She also expressed serious concerns over increased acts of harassment and repression against civil society and political opposition, as well as the diplomatic crisis with Sweden. In its conclusions on Belarus the Council of the European Union reiterated the commitment to the policy of critical engagement, including through dialogue and participation in the Eastern Partnership. The Council confirmed its readiness to launch negotiations for visa facilitation and readmission agreements with the Belarusian authorities which would enhance people-to-people contacts to the benefit of the Belarusian population at large.

The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs denounced the decision by the EU calling its policy "incompatible with good neighbourhood relations".

An International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission, led by David Hofman, arrived in Minsk on 16 October to hold post-programme monitoring discussions with the Belarusian authorities as part of the third review of the country's stand-by arrangement (SBA) that expired in April 2010.
The October 18-29 visit will make it possible for the IMF staff and the Belarusian authorities to discuss Minsk's economic policy and prospects for the Belarusian economy's development in 2013, said the Fund's Belarus office. The 15-month, SDR1.62 billion (about $2.46 billion) arrangement was approved by the IMF Executive Board on January 12, 2009. On June 29, 2009, the IMF financial support under the SBA was increased to SDR2.27 billion (about $3.52 billion). Finance Minister Andrey Kharkavets said earlier this month that Belarus wanted to take a new IMF loan. He declined to comment on the amount that the country would like to borrow however mentioned that it would be equal to a gap in financing the economy in the next three to five years. Led by Economy Minister Mikalay Snapkou, a delegation of the Belarusian government attended the Annual Meetings of the Boards of Governors of the IMF and the World Bank Group in Tokyo between October 9 and 13.

Russia intends to make Belarus pay compensation for a $1 billion revenue loss caused by Minsk exporting duty-free gasoline and other oil products under the guide of solvents. Belarus, as a member of the Moscow-led Customs Union, does not pay customs duties on oil supplies from Russia. In return, it is expected to pay this duty to Russia, if it refines the imported Russian crude and exports it as fuel and petroleum products. In an apparent move to boost its foreign currency earnings, Belarus has started exporting petroleum products described in cross-customs documents as "complex organic solvents." Under the customs union regulations, solvents can be exported to world markets duty-free. Russia insists Belarus must comply with the previously agreed plan and supply 2.1 million tons of gasoline and 3.5 million tons of diesel fuel refined from Russian crude to the Russian market by the end of 2012. Belarus may incur losses worth tens of millions of U.S. dollars from such supplies because the Belarusian state-run petrochemical company Belnaftakhim buys Russian crude at a price higher than oil prices in Russia and will have to sell petroleum products at rates below Russian prices. According to the Belarusian Statistical Agency Belstat, Belarus exported 244,000 tons of "solvents" in 2010 while these exports grew to 2.1 million tons in 2011 and to 2.9 million tons in the first half of 2012. Latvia was the main buyer of Belarusian "solvents," purchasing 1.5 million tons.

The only independent monthly humanities magazine published in the Belarusian language, ARCHE, faces closure. The magazine's editor-in-chief, Valery Bulhakau, was briefly detained in September and later fined for allegedly 'conducting illegal business activities', including the distribution of the book 'The Sovietisation of Western Belarus' by Yan Shumski in the Belarusian city of Hrodna. The representatives of the Belarusian Financial Investigations Department (BFID) later visited the publishing house where ARCHE magazine is printed and seized all documentation dated 2011 and 2012. Additionally, more than five thousand books from the personal collection of Valery Bulhakau were confiscated. Both, Valery Bulhakau and the founder of ARCHE magazine, Andrey Dynko, were summoned to BFID for interrogation. To avoid the closure of the media outlet, Dynko had to appoint a new editor-in-chief. Despite this measure the bank account of ARCHE was blocked. Valery Bulhakau links the persecution of his activities to the increasing pressure on Belarus' cultural community by the secret services.

Editorial



Olga Stuzhinskaya



Tatiana Kouzina



Yaraslau Kryvoi

This issue of Belarus Headlines covers a number of current topics and developments, including the Belarusian parliamentary election, the Eastern Partnership, the European Dialogue on Modernisation as well as changes in the Belarusian Foreign Ministry.

The issue begins with Dzianis Melyantsou's article on the European Dialogue on Modernisation, which, as the author believes, should not be regarded as the end result, but as a vast platform for communication to as many stakeholders as possible. Its focus should be shifted to the points of common interest of the authorities, business and civil society.

In his other article Dzianis notes that the Belarusian opposition failed to use the opportunity to communicate with voters. He also suggests that the EU should have a more nuanced approach, based on the evaluation of various parameters of the system without being linked to the elections, as well as more transparent requirement on adding and removal of individuals from its black list.

Siarhei Bohdan discusses the change of leadership at the Foreign Ministry of Belarus and the personality of Uladzimir Makey - the newly appointed minister.

Also in this issue, Belarus Headlines gives an overview of analytical papers prepared by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. These include the launch of BISS Political Media Barometer which highlights that Belarusian opposition in its media communication focuses not on social and economic problems which are important for the whole population, but rather on internal processes and international activities.

Another study shows that the rate of growth in real incomes of the population has a direct influence on the president's credibility level in Belarus. Another trend is that the faster real wages grow, the more citizens are willing to observe the "strong hand" of the state in the economy. If wages decline, Belarusians tend to favour more market freedom and less state intervention.

An overview of current activities describes the study visit of Belarusian experts on transport and transit to Lithuania, and the co-organisation of the international conference dedicated to improving public transportation in Belarus, as well as information meetings for Belarusian civil society organisations presenting European opportunities of support for Belarus.

Belarus Digest published several articles on the Belarusian elections, public housing programmes in Belarus, the *Dazhynki* festival and Belarus-Georgia relations. Belarus Headlines gives a short overview of them.

Maryna Rakhlei's article on Alexander Medved' - one of the most famous sportsman from Belarus of all time, concludes the issue.

Co-editors:
Olga Stuzhinskaya, director of the Office for a Democratic Belarus
Tatiana Kouzina, executive director of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies
Yaraslau Kryvoi, editor-in-chief of Belarus Digest

News in Short

Sweden is negotiating the return of its ambassador back to Belarus, who was earlier sent home following the incident with the "teddy bear invasion", as stated the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden Carl Bildt on October 15th. According to him, Sweden is ready to bring him back "straight away" but they are "negotiating it at the moment".

PACE Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy unanimously nominated Ales Bialiatski – the human rights defender sentenced on 24 November 2011 to four and a half years' imprisonment – for the 2013 PACE Human Rights Prize. In its statement, the committee reiterated its call to the Belarusian authorities "immediately and unconditionally to release and rehabilitate all political prisoners, including those who have been pardoned", pointing out that twelve political prisoners remain in jail and that there are serious reports and allegations of torture, inadequate medical care and lack of access to legal assistance.

Belarus' official reserve assets and other assets in foreign currency went down by 6.8% in January-September 2012 to $9.919 billion as of 1 October, reads a statistics report released by the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus. Since the beginning of the year other assets in foreign currency and gold outside the reserves (in banks below A rating as rated by Fitch Ratings or Standard & Poor's as well as A2 rating as rated by Moody's Investor Service) have dropped to $1.8 billion as of 1 October. Of the figure deposits totalled $1.3 billion, with gold deposits at $485.3 million.
Expected foreign currency expenditures within a year of public agencies stood at $4.39 billion as of 1 October 2012. Of the total it is necessary to pay $4.37 billion on loans and securities and $15.4 million on liabilities as part of forward transactions.
Belarus' conditional liabilities in foreign currency (mainly the guarantees that have been issued by the government and the National Bank) may require paying $1.47 billion within 12 months after 1 October 2012.

Announcements

Belarus in Focus 2012: Journalism Competition and Guide for Journalists launched

'Belarus in Focus 2012' is the second edition of a competition for journalists writing about Belarus. The deadline for submissions is January 15, 2013. Winners will receive monetary prizes of EUR 2,000, EUR 1,000 or EUR 500. All finalists will be invited to attend a two-day workshop in Warsaw in spring 2013. Please see rules and how to enter.

Judges will look for articles that present a new, original side to Belarus and explore the country beyond the label of 'Europe's last dictatorship'.

The judging panel will include Mr. Andrei Kolesnikov, *Kommersant* (Russia), Prof. David Marples, University of Alberta (Canada), Mr. Oliver Money-Kyrle, International Federation of Journalists (UK), and Ms. Yuliya Slutskaya, *Solidarity with Belarus Information Office* (Belarus).

Last year's winning articles came from Harper's Magazine (U.S.), The Independent (U.K.), and Delo (Slovenia).

'Belarus in Focus' is held by Solidarity with Belarus Information Office in cooperation with Press Club Polska. Other partners include Belapan, Belarusian Association of Journalists, Civic Belarus, Belarusian Human Rights House in Exile, "n-ost, the Network for Reporting on Eastern Europe", Office for a Democratic Belarus, Ostgruppen.

At the same time, Solidarity with Belarus Information Office would like to present a new online resource for journalists writing about Belarus: www.belarusforjournalists.info. Here journalists can find contacts, practical tips, and background information, as well as swap stories and repost their articles.

Contact: Alexandra Kirby: a.kirby-lepesh@solidarityby.eu

EU and EaP Partners

European Dialogue on Modernisation: A Model Kit

By Dzianis Melyantsou, Minsk



EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle at the Conference 'Transforming Belarus: Ways Ahead'. December 2011, Brussels. Photo by ODB

Although the European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarus has just kicked off, it has already faced a barrage of criticism from both Belarusian and European experts. Nevertheless, despite its somewhat vague nature and equivocal objectives, it seems to stand a chance of turning into an efficient platform for a variety of stakeholders to communicate and has a potential for drawing attention to Belarusian issues in the European political scene.

Dialogue on modernisation: communication in a new environment

The European Dialogue on Modernisation (EDM) with Belarusian society was officially launched by Commissioner Štefan Füle on 29 March 2012, amidst the diplomatic crisis between Minsk and Brussels. Now that top level bilateral intergovernmental contacts are blocked, the programme brings about a new model for cooperation with Belarusian civil society and political opposition with a view to "exchanging views and ideas … on necessary reforms for the modernisation of Belarus"(1).

The third round of start-up technical meetings of the EDM expert working groups was held in September. Members of these teams, however, still seem to be unaware of their roles and the objectives of their groups. Some Belarusian analysts have already pointed out the main problems of the initiative: vague goals and objectives, lack of elaborated institutional frameworks and procedures, and its hasty launch. Indeed, the first meetings of the expert teams indicated that the participants lacked a clear understanding of what the final result of the Dialogue should look like.

Yet Brussels offers no ready answers, inviting well-grounded criticism of the Belarusian participates. However, the lack of clearly defined objectives and procedures also presupposes the involvement of Belarusian participants in formulating them, hence their more prominent role in developing the initiative itself in line with their own vision of current challenges and urgent concerns that need to be addressed by the country as a whole and its civil and expert communities.

In this context, the Dialogue on Modernisation should be perceived as an initiative aimed primarily not at the end result, but rather the process (communication, dialogue, sharing of experience), enabling Belarus to keep the EU interested and consolidating the expert potential of its civil society.

Should the authorities be engaged?

An important question is whether to engage government experts in the Dialogue. So far, experts representing government institutions are not involved in working group meetings, despite certain diplomatic efforts by Brussels. Why is it important to enrol state specialists as well?

First, the state is always the chief implementer of any reform. Without engaging the state (even at the level of experts from government institutions) in the elaboration of reform proposals, there is hardly any hope that the reforms that the Dialogue will come up with will be introduced at all.

Second, to analyse current modernisation requirements and prepare effective draft reforms, the authors require data that often cannot be accessed by independent researchers, while being available to government experts.

Third, the involvement of state experts and the authorities as a whole is required as a confidence-building measure. This will reduce the degree of suspicion of the EDM and ensure a more efficient and unchecked operation of expert groups.

Fourth, because the Dialogue presupposes exchanging experiences and enhancing the competence of the Belarusian participants, it would be helpful to engage the officials responsible for developing modernisation plans within state institutions. This will enable them to gain knowledge of the valuable experience and insight of transition from EU Member States.

However, the EU's signals regarding the involvement of government representatives in the Dialogue are somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, it expresses its interest in having government experts on expert teams, but on the other hand, it insists that official Minsk cannot officially participate in the EDM as a third party (alongside Brussels and Belarusian civil society). This results in misunderstandings and lack of confidence at the intergovernmental level, which naturally creates obstacles to the advancement of the initiative.

Under which circumstances will the Dialogue be efficient?

The EDM is still at the stage of development, and it depends largely on members of the working groups what the Dialogue will eventually come to. The efficiency of this initiative will to a great extent depend on how realistic the objectives and the agenda for the Dialogue are. I believe that the following circumstances should be prioritised to maximize the impact of the EDM:

First, it is important to commence the development of modernisation proposals with a **thorough study of the current status of various sectors of state and public life**, rather than the introduction of the positive track records of foreign countries or negotiating country development priorities with Belarusian stakeholders.

Second, during the research and reform planning phase, it is important to **engage experts from government institutions** (even unofficially), both to bridge the knowledge gaps and check the initial proposals for their feasibility. It will also be helpful for government experts to familiarise themselves with modernisation experiences.

Third, in order for future reform projects to have at least the slightest chance of being effectively implemented, **focus should be shifted to the points of common interest of the authorities, business and civil society** and development of proposals in these areas.

And fourth, because the Dialogue is perceived primarily as a process to share experience and formulate a vision of Belarus' future, the **entire initiative should be employed as a vast platform for communication to as many stakeholders as possible**, from European officials and experts to Belarusian NGO and government specialists. On the one hand, this exchange of opinions can become a solid first step towards building up confidence between the EU and Minsk; on the other hand, it can be used as a tool to communicate with the broader public in Belarus, who is still unaware of the European Dialogue.

This text was initially published on the Belarusian information portanl naviny.by in Russian and later translated and adapted for Belarus Headlines. The full version of the article can be found at this link.

dzianis@belinstitute.eu

----

1 Launching the European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarus

EU and EaP Partners

European Integration Index for Eastern Partnership Countries. Is there Hope for Belarus?

Prepared by Alyona Lis, Brussels

On 5 October, the Open Society Institute Brussels organised a debate, entitled "Road to Reform: Assessing Progress in the Eastern Neighbourhood".

Experts from international think-tanks, and partner countries, as well as EU representatives provided an overview of the situation in all six EaP countries and touched upon challenges and successes of the Eastern Partnership Initiative. During the event the European Integration Index for Eastern Partnership Countries prepared under leadership of the International Renaissance Foundation and the Open Society Foundations (Ukraine) was presented.

The authors of the Index divided the EaP countries into two groups :

- countries with clear EU ambitions, such as Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine
- partners with less obvious aspirations, being Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus.

The EU made 'deep and sustainable democracy' a core value against which to assess the progress with the main benchmarks including: free and fair elections, respect for human rights - particularly freedom of association, expression and assembly, - press freedom, the abolition of torture, non-discrimination and religious freedom, the independence of the judiciary, combating corruption, and security and law enforcement reforms.

In 2012, the EU continued to put into practice a '**more for more**' approach that was announced in May 2011, meaning a greater rapprochement with the countries that demonstrate an enhanced commitment, using funding for social and economic development, capacity building for government, greater market access, increased funds from European financial institutions, and greater mobility through visa facilitation and visa free travel as the incentives.

The authors of the Index suggested three dimensions to assess progress of the EaP partners, such as linkage, approximation and management .

Moldova remains the most willing country in terms of reform, the second best performer was Georgia while Ukraine was the third. Armenia and Azerbaijan rank fourth and fifth accordingly, while Belarus was placed at the bottom of the list in all three dimensions. The situation in Ukraine has deteriorated if compared to 2011. Only time will tell which direction developments will take in Georgia after the recent transition of power. Armenia has demonstrated better results in approximation with the EU standards in different sectors. With regard to Armenia, international observers stated that May 2012 parliamentary election marked a step forward if compared to the 2008 election. Moreover, the Armenian government has started negotiations on Visa Facilitation (VF) and Readmission Agreements (RA) and unilaterally abolished entrance visas for EU citizens. It also managed to improve the situation in terms of freedom of associations. Many analysts believe that this trend will be preserved at least until the next presidential election.

Belarus remains a bright example of the ' **less for less**' approach. Since the country has not signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU and the official bilateral dimension has been limited following the 2010 presidential election resulting in the introduction of sanctions, Belarus has no ongoing political dialogue with the EU and participates only in the multilateral track of the EaP.

However the EaP outsider managed to benefit most of all from a more advanced level of dialogue proposed in the frames of the Eastern Partnership. Belarusian officials and civil servants regularly participate in the meetings of EaP institutions with the exception of Euronest. Belarusian civil society played a very active role in the development of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. Compared to other EaP countries, Belarus' economic integration with the EU is limited however it surprisingly enjoys the most intensive trade in services with the EU. The European Union remains Belarus' second largest trading partner after the Russian Federation.

Belarus actively participates in the trade and economic commissions, consultations between Foreign Ministries, visits by entrepreneurs, and investment talks with the representatives of EU countries.

Despite Belarus possessing a weak regulatory environment by EU standards and an insufficient environmental policy, it still has the best environmental situation among all six EaP countries when it comes to the general state of environment, the impact on the environmental situation and resource efficiency.



During presentation of European Integration Index for Eastern Partnership Countries in Brussels. Photo by ODB

Unlike its EaP partners, no negotiations for the conclusion of the Visa-Facilitation Agreement are being conducted with Belarus, though a mandate to start VFA and readmission talks was given to the European Commission by the Council of Foreign Ministers back in 2011. Until now, Minsk has not reacted to this initiative. At the same time Belarus appears to be the frontrunner among EaP countries with the highest number of Schengen visas per capita issued to its citizens per year.

Belarus is not an easy country to deal with. It has not announced any European aspirations, the country is a member of the Customs and the Eurasian Unions with Russia and Kazakhstan. However, as the opinion polls show there are strong European aspirations among Belarusian society. The country borders with three EU members and has a centuries-long European history. Belarus can be seen as a country with great European potential, provided the political climate is changed.

The question remains what can be done to encourage this change? Senior analyst with the Belarusian Institute for strategic Studies, Dzianis Melyantsou, one of the contributors to the European Integration Index, suggests applying a better communication strategy (raising awareness), cheaper visas, economic cooperation, more exchange programmes, support for independent media including the regional ones along with continuous and consistent work with civil society.
In the situation when the progress of any partner country depends on the political will of its leadership - often defending its own business and political interests - choosing the right communication strategy is crucial for the EU. To achieve the desired impact it should reach out to broader groups in societies of the EaP countries. While no membership perspective can be promised it is important to show all benefits of the two main incentives under the Eastern Partnership: the Association Agreement (including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area) and the visa-free travel.

The EaP has more challenges to face, such as a different understanding of the core values and the growing counteracting by another strategic player in the region - Moscow which definitely beating the EU in the information field so far. To ensure the success reached within the years since its launch, more ambitious policy by the EU towards six EaP countries should be considered.

alyona@democraticbelarus.eu

----

1. European Inegration Index for Eastern Partnership Countries, p. 6
2. **Linkage:** growing political, economic and social ties between each of the six EaP countries and the EU
Approximation: structures and institutions in the EaP countries converging towards EU standards and in line with the EU requrements
Management: evolving managing structures and policies for Euroepan Inegration in EaP countries.

EU and EaP Partners

Contacts Between People: EU Visa Policies Towards Eastern Partnership Countries

Prepared by Elena Shuba, Brussels



During the Conference at Analytical Centre on Globalisation and Regional Cooperation. Photo by ACGRC

On 12 October, the Analytical Centre on Globalisation and Regional Cooperation (ACGRC, Armenia) hosted a conference entitled “Contacts between people: EU visa policies towards the Eastern Partnership countries”. The event was organised in cooperation with the Stefan Batory Foundation (Poland) and the Coalition for the European Continent Undivided by Visa Barriers and was supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. During the conference successes and challenges of the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative together with the prospects and barriers for visa facilitation and liberalisation for the EaP countries were presented and discussed. The event gathered experts from both EU and Eastern Partnership countries, Armenian students, media and civil society representatives.

In the first session discussion focused on the impact of the EaP initiative and the transformation processes occurring in the EaP countries in their aspiration to approximate to European standards and values. The need for simplification of the visa regime between the EU and the EaP countries was the focus of the second panel discussion. According to the experts, simplification of the visa regime and even its complete abolition in terms of short-term stay in Europe, will contribute to the further development of bilateral relations, especially in the sphere of science and student exchange. In addition, the rigid framework of the current visa regime with the EU, humiliates citizens of EaP countries which, in turn, contributes to tension and frustration in the perception of Europe in those countries.

In this view, the organisers of the conference, **Stepan Grigoryan**, Chairman of the Board of the Analytical Centre on Globalisation and Regional Cooperation, and **Joanna Fomina**, coordinator of the Friendly EU-Border Project at and the Visa-free Europe Coalition, offered to look at EU visa policies on Eastern Partnership countries from the perspective of people-to-people relations, often divided by visa barriers.

The first session opened with the presentation of **Alžběta Chmelařová**, a researcher from the Association for International Affairs (AMO) in Prague, the Czech Republic. The expert focused on the successes that the EaP initiative has achieved and the challenges it is facing. According to the speaker, the EaP turned out to be a “normative failure”. It created a disillusion among people whose expectations are not being met by the EU promises. In general, the expert believes that the EaP is a weak instrument for transformation and is not comprehensible for ordinary citizens. At the same time, “if you don’t see light at the end of the tunnel, it doesn’t mean it is not there”, commented Ms. Chmelařová. In her recommendations on how to improve the EaP instrument she suggested concentrating on youth, supporting the formal and informal education sectors and paying more attention to the fight against racism and nationalism, historical heritage, and frozen conflicts.

Maryana Kuzio, Coordinator of Europe without Barriers from Kyiv, Ukraine, in her comments noted, that a large distance remains between different partner states in their progress towards visa free travel for their citizens. At the same time, estimation of the progress of the partner countries in implementation of certain standards is a very technical procedure. This is, for example, valid when we try to estimate the progress of two front-runner countries in the process of visa liberalisation - Moldova and Ukraine - which managed to open Visa Dialogues with the EU in 2010. Ms. Kuzio believes that more promises should be given to the EaP countries to meet the expectations of those citizens who clearly support a European choice for their countries. In general, liberalisation of people-to-people contacts via visa free travel with the EU is an issue of high importance for the societies of the EaP countries.

Elena Shuba, Project Manager from the Office for a Democratic Belarus in Brussels, Belgium, concluded the discussion in the first session stressing that when the EU was launching the EaP initiative it couldn’t expect the same speed of reforms that has been achieved in Central Europe. Unfortunately, it seems to be a “mission impossible“ to overcome the Soviet heritage of the EaP countries in the less than 4 years in which the EaP initiative is operating. Due to this and other reasons the EaP cannot yet be called a success story. The speaker suggested searching for other approaches and reformulating EU policy in such a way that every EaP country interested in conducting the reforms would have the stimuli to do so. Among the recommendations mentioned were to continue consistently and coherently working with civil society of the EaP countries; focus on youth facilitating student exchange programmes and internships; facilitate the dialogue and exchange of best practices between all EaP countries; enhance coordination of the EaP policy instruments; keep up efforts to increase the awareness about the EU, its values and the costs and benefits of the “European choice” for the EaP countries.

During the second session panellists discussed the prospects and barriers for visa facilitation and liberalisation in the EaP countries. **Joanna Fomina** focused on the progress made by the EaP countries towards visa liberalisation with the EU. She explained that Armenia is getting very close to finalising talks on the visa facilitation and readmission agreements, and when they are signed the most important stage will begin – the monitoring of implementation of those agreements. Ms. Fomina spoke about the phases of the Action plans for visa liberalisation offered to Ukraine and Moldova. The Action plan on visa liberalisation sets a series of benchmarks on four 'blocks' of relevant issues, with the view to both the adoption of a legislative and policy framework (phase 1) and its effective implementation (phase 2), explained the expert. In 2012 both Ukraine and Moldova were supposed to implement the first phase of the plan, which focused mainly on legislative changes. According to Ms. Fomina Armenia, for example, could learn from Moldova or Ukraine in terms of the visa facilitation process. She also stressed that self-assessment of the progress and results is very important.

The next speaker, **Eleonora Vergeer**, a Policy Advisor on migration issues from the EU Advisory Group, gave a presentation on where Armenia stands in the visa facilitation and visa liberalisation processes with the EU. She explained that the negotiations on the visa facilitation and readmission agreements were officially launched in February 2012 and by now have almost reached the final stage. Ms. Vergeer listed the benefits that a visa-facilitation agreement can bring: making the application process for a short-term visa easier, faster and cheaper. She also spoke about the connotations of official terms explaining that “easier” in fact means the facilitation of visa application procedures for certain categories of citizens (journalists, students, sportsmen, others), while “faster and cheaper” applies to all visa applicants. “The road towards visa liberalisation is a long one and it is time to start work towards opening Visa Dialogue with the EU”, concluded Ms. Vergeer.

Iryna Sushko, Head of the Europe without Barriers public initiative in Kyiv, Ukraine, discussed the effectiveness of the visa facilitation agreement based on the results of independent monitoring of visa issuance by Schengen countries consulates in Ukraine. She suggested looking at the visa policy as at an area of public administration. In many cases people get their first impressions of the EU when they first go to the consulate to apply for a visa. The negative attitude towards them can break the image of the EU where everything is of a “high standard”, said the expert. Ms. Sushko stressed that often ordinary citizens are not fully aware of the procedures and opportunities listed in the EU visa code and therefore do not use the opportunity to benefit from them. Regarding the case of Armenia, Ms. Sushko suggested initiating the monitoring process already at this stage and expressed the opinion that the role of the civil society and expert community should be enhanced in this process. “Judging by the monitoring experience, it is crucial to see the real opportunities for facilitation of the visa application process included in the visa facilitation agreement that should be used by the citizens”, said the expert.

Expert presentations were followed by a discussion of visa practices by different consulates. Ukrainian experts presented a photo exhibition that was launched to draw the attention of the EU to the problem of the freedom of movement in Eastern Europe. **Stepan Grigoryan** concluded that “the fight for each particular visa case is of crucial importance if we want to change visa practices for the better”. All panellists agreed that visa facilitation and liberalisation processes make a real difference to people-to-people contacts and help to improve bilateral relations in all areas.

elena@democraticbelarus.eu

Politics and Society

Belarusian Diplomacy Gets New Face

By Siarhei Bohdan, Berlin



Belarus' new Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makey. Photo by freesmi.by

After a tense summer of relations with the EU, Belarus' leadership has undertaken a number of changes in its foreign policy. On 20 August, Uladzimir Makey was appointed the new foreign minister by the Belarusian president. Prior to this role, Makey had been head of the Presidential Administration – the most important centre of power in the Belarusian political system.

Lukashenka needed a "soldier", not a diplomat, in the office of foreign minister, commented Pavel Usau in Belarusian Review, and Makey seems to suit this role well. He challenged the West at the September session of the UN General Assembly, according to Radio Liberty. He also played an important part in the almost successful rapprochement with the West in 2008-2010. One thing is clear, Belarusian diplomacy is entering a new era and there is evidence to suggest that this will not necessarily be shaped by further confrontation with the West.

Enemies in Foreign Ministry

Lukashenka has always faced problems with his foreign ministers. In fact, he has not had his own experts on foreign relations in the ministry since the very beginning. After the 1994 elections, he had to give the foreign minister's office for a short period to Syan'ko, known for his earlier contacts with democrats. Then the young president saw that the man was not up to the job and replaced him with another former foe – a more solid and more dangerous former high-level apparatchik. The Communist intellectual Dr. Antanovich helped to consolidate the regime and was dropped before he posed a threat because of his connections in Belarus and the Kremlin.

The next representative was Khvastou, who was just a temporary figure in every regard. Only Dr. Latypau, who followed him, managed to give Belarusian diplomacy some weight. Yet, he also was just a fellow-traveller of Lukashenka and definitely not 'his man'. So, after a while, he went to Moscow – as two other former foreign ministers had done, and in 2003 Martynau was appointed foreign minister.

The need for an overhaul in the foreign ministry after his nine-year stint is all too evident. Martynau was remarkably bleak, even among the grey masses of Belarusian officials. His disappearance might well go unnoticed. And he was also unable to satisfy Lukashenka politically. One of the versions why he had been sacked indicated that after the scandal of the Swedish teddy-bear bombardment, Martynau brought to Lukashenka a proposal of retaliation which was too mild.

Soviet Self-Made Man

Therefore, with Makey, Lukashenka for the first time has a foreign minister who is both qualified for the job and politically reliable. The ministry indeed was in need of a shrewd administrator like Makey. His track-record shows that he can organise Belarusian foreign relations in a more efficient way. He has already started to actively recruit specialists badly needed by Foreign Ministry in other government agencies. His government connections and influence will also give him extra advantages in reshaping the Ministry.

There are a number of myths about the man, of which few are actually true. Undoubtedly, he is very much a Soviet kind of self-made man. Yet, Makey may be the most mythical figure of the regime. Some Belarusian media have claimed he is a former Soviet spy from the secretive GRU army intelligence service. More likely, however, he just served in the army as an information analyst officer, listening to and translating foreign communications.

Another myth concerns the Western experience of the new Foreign Minister. He does indeed speak English and German and did participate in short-term training at the Austrian Diplomatic Academy. But those exceptions aside he is a product of Soviet system. A notable detail, however, is that the previous minister, Martynau, having graduated from the top Soviet university failed to get a job with the Soviet Foreign Ministry and was exiled to the Soviet Belarusian Foreign Ministry in deeply provincial Minsk. Makey, in contrast, managed on his own to achieve spectacular heights in the Soviet Union though he started from very disadvantaged position being a village boy without connections.

A third myth concerns Makey as a person inclined to reform, with a liberal approach and ready for rapprochement with the West. This was presumably proven by a brief period of looser political control in 2008-2010 when he was a grand vizier of Belarusian politics, head of the Presidential Administration. Indeed, these years were perhaps when the regime has been its most cooperative in relations with the West.

His job will now not be an easy one, and not only because of the state of relations with the West. Problems lie within Belarusian diplomacy itself. On 1 September, after inaugurating the new building of the Faculty of International Relations of the Belarusian State University, Alyaksandr Lukashenka expressed concern about the staffing situation in the diplomatic service. He pointed out that there are now fewer people pursuing a career in diplomacy and many qualified specialists are quitting the Foreign Ministry.

"This situation is a natural result of Minsk's self-isolating foreign policy and the tiny salaries that Belarusian diplomats receive," commented the director of Liberal Club Yauhen Preihierman in Belarus Digest. However, many problems of Belarusian diplomacy are related to its short history – it is simply too young.

Diplomatic Relations with Germany Since 1922

Although Soviet Belarus had a very specific form of statehood due to its strict control from Moscow, one cannot say it was altogether uninvolved in international relations. Thus, back in 1922 the then tiny Soviet Belarus established relations with the German Weimar republic and opened a mission in Berlin.

Very soon, however, Belarusian foreign relations were put under the direct control of Moscow. In 1944, it came up with the idea of Belarus joining the newly created United Nations as a separate member providing the USSR with one more vote. As a result, a small Belarusian Foreign Ministry and a Belarusian representative office to the UN in New York were established.

It was only a symbolic attribute of statehood, yet gradually Belarus became more involved in relations with foreign countries. Some prominent politicians visited Soviet Belarus, among them UN Secretary-General U Thant, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, Cuban President Fidel Castro, and US President Richard Nixon. The Consulates of East Germany, Poland, and later Bulgaria were opened in Minsk.

All that had little political significance, however. The establishment of real foreign relations began in the 1990s. Belarus had to struggle with a

Politics and Society

Belarusian Diplomacy Gets New Face

By Siarhei Bohdan, Berlin

catastrophic lack of experienced specialists, infrastructure and awareness of basic state interests among elites. Back then, in the early 1990s, Vyachaslau Kebich who was in effect running the country appointed an Italian to be Belarusian Ambassador "to all countries of the world." The Italian promised Kebich to find badly needed loans and only the national democratic opposition managed to stop this crazy deal.

The Foreign Ministry Is Not Elitist

In stark contrast to Soviet tradition, Belarusian diplomacy has never been elitist. In the 1990s, the ministry employed mostly alumni of the Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages and the Historical Department of the Belarus State University – most relevant whilst also being accessible to all. Although in time, the Faculty of International Relations was established, it also never became an exclusive elite institution like the Moscow's MGIMO and its alumni could not dominate the Foreign Ministry.

As a result employment at the foreign ministry remains possible and accessible even today. But the question is whether anyone wants such a job. The Ministry itself is not as important place as the Presidential Administration; therefore it is not the path to the best career. In addition, the pay is low (USD 300 for entry level graduates stationed in Minsk), while overtime and working weekends are considered normal practice.

In these circumstances, the Foreign Ministry harboured and harbours many dissidents. I met a Belarusian consul to one quite important country who wore under his shirt a t-shirt with the Pahonia – a historic Belarusian symbol widely used by the opposition. It again poses the question about the loose nature of the Belarusian regime.

To blame the Foreign Ministry for the international problems Belarus faces would be unjust. Belarus still has ideologically charged ruling elites and an opposition that fails to understand neither the country's problems nor the hard reality of global politics. Ruling elites try to maintain the status quo neglecting the evident fact that Belarus needs to reform and modernise. The opposition has its own ideological schemes yet almost no experience of how to run a country, e.g. how to find money to pay for the state's needs and what to do with industry which needs markets in the West to survive and save working places.



Former Belarusian Foreign Minister, Piatro Krauchanka

Potash State

Until the mid-1990s independent Belarus pursued a rather pro-Western foreign policy under the ambitious Foreign Minister Piatro Krauchanka, who later opted for opposition to Lukashenka. Unfortunately, the first priority of the West was how to guarantee the removal of nuclear arms from the country, he admits in his published memoirs.

It is, therefore, no wonder Lukashenka was easily able to sell to people his idea of radical change in foreign policy. Thus, he brought Belarus closer to Russia and looked for new markets for Belarusian industry where they realistically could be found – in post-Soviet nations and developing countries. This is officially called "multi-directional" foreign policy. Despite speculation, he quite probably has stayed in the framework of international conventions even when cutting deals with regimes confronting the West. In this way he was able to avoid the urgent need to modernise industry – there was after all no money to modernise anyway.

The problem, however, remains – Belarus still needs modernisation and a new economic model. Despite desperate attempts to sell machinery to the developing world, the bulk of Belarusian exports, even to developing countries familiar with Soviet technical standards (like Vietnam) are made up of potash and its derivative products, not tractors. Essentially, for Belarus potash plays the role that oil plays in Arab countries.

The tragedy of Belarusian foreign policy has to do with an unrealistic view of the country's foreign policy displayed both by the regime and opposition. The "European choice" promoted by the opposition cannot replace a discussion of national interests. Chinese investments and Russian subsidies brought by Lukashenka cannot ensure Belarusian prosperity in the future and take the place of reform.

bohdan@belarusdigest.com

Sad Elections in Belarus

By Dzianis Melyantsou, Minsk

Traditionally, the Belarusian authorities have preferred to conduct parliamentary elections in "silent mode" to avoid the unnecessary mobilisation of the opposition and protesting voters. This year's elections are no exception. An easily observed tendency among the Belarusian people is their growing disenchantment with the elections as a political institution. The opposition as a whole has used the elections to solve its internal questions and not for communicating with the voters. And the authorities have renewed the House of Representatives while securing its complete loyalty without using any repressive measures. The European Union still views the elections in Belarus as an opportunity for change and as a test for Minsk, which will either be rewarded by a lifting of the sanctions or penalised by their tightening.

Results for the public

Regardless of the voter turnout tradition dating back to Soviet times, the Belarusian public has a rather realistic view of the actual voting process and the degree of parliament's significance as a government body.

According to IISEPS, 54,5% of the respondents do not think their vote has any influence on the election results. Only 36,7%(1) are convinced of the opposite. Asked in June 2012, 39,6% thought the coming elections would not be free and fair (36,8% assumed they would). 46,9% (against 39,1%) estimated to see only an imitation of candidate competition at the elections, presuming the seats to be distributed in advance by the authorities. At the same time, as early as in June 50,7% of the interviewed participants confirmed their intent to participate in the voting(2). Previous election campaigns indicate this number increases as the voting gets closer. So much for the question of whether the parliamentary election in Belarus actually took place. Nevertheless, compared to the 2008 elections this number of the potential voters has significantly decreased pointing to the general loss of interest for the elections.

It is worth noting, however, that the general lack of enthusiasm among the Belarusian people is not to be mixed up with the election boycott, which was supported by only 14,2% of respondents prior to the election. This way, voter passivity is not caused by their civil choice of refusing to participate in the rigged elections staged by the authorities, but rather by the lack of faith in the

Politics and Society

Sad Elections in Belarus

By Dzianis Melyantsou, Minsk



During the early vote at one of the polling stations in Belarus. Photo by Siarhei Balay (gazetaby.com)

House of Representatives' ability to solve their problems and the absence of a visible, clear and attractive political alternative (only 8,6% of the citizens were ready to vote for the opposition leaders).

Results for the opposition

None of the political organisations participating in the run-up to the parliamentary election believed in its fairness or any possibility to use it to influence the national political situation. This opinion, however, did not unite the opposition. On the contrary, three election strategies emerged: a boycott, participation, and restricted participation (UCP and BNF withdrew their candidates before the voting). This additionally contributed to the electorate's disenchantment.

Not focusing on the reasons for choosing the boycott scenario (lack of resources has probably played a role), it can be noted that despite the assurances of this scenario's backers about preparing a full-scale boycott campaign, only several rallies could be carried out, with the rest of the activity limited to publications in the opposition media. As was concluded earlier, this campaign did not have any influence on overall voter behavior.

The parties and movements that had more realistic goals in mind – increasing the number of their supporters by participating in the election – have at least reminded society of their existence. But in the course of campaigning even this opposition group has mainly raised questions of little concern for the regular citizen, such as human rights issues, political prisoners, state government reforms etc., which was unlikely to add to their popularity.

As a result, the political opposition emerged from the election as two enemy camps (proponents and opponents of the boycott) that are still embroiled in the discussions about boycott's efficiency and the moral side of the participating in the elections under current political conditions.

This way, even though its individual members are working on broadening their social base, the opposition as a whole uses the election campaigns first of all as a tool to reshape power distribution within the opposition itself. The majority of the election topics and issues raised by the opposition candidates touched upon the opposition discourse, and not the social or economic woes of the country that the citizens are mostly concerned with. What the leaders and activists had in mind during their speeches was the reaction of their opposition colleagues, and not the opinion of their district's voters.

Results for the authorities

The parliamentary election has smoothly followed the usual government scenario. The election commissions consisted of the individuals completely loyal to the authorities, administrative resources guaranteed a high percentage of advance votes, and the Central Election Commission did its best to neutralise all the positive changes made to the election laws in 2010. All of this allowed the rapid formation of the new parliament after the first voting round without giving the mandates to any unwelcome individuals.

It is worth noting some particular points that are important for the assessment of the past elections.

First of all, the authorities feel safe enough not to make any serious concessions to the West and to wait for a more solid proposition than the one currently on the table. This confidence rests on the secure backing of Russia that prefers not to destabilize its relationships with Belarus until the new common block (Eurasian Union) is formed and finalised.

Secondly, the authorities have maintained their normal "routine" level of repression, unusual for the elections under the conditions of a "cold war" with the West. The reason might be a weak hope of a better assessment by the OSCE and, consequently, an improvement of relations with the EU. The registration of almost all of the opposition candidates and the appointment of the new foreign minister probably also serve this goal.

Thirdly, the House of Representatives was significantly renewed, with only 19% of the delegates staying on from the previous term. It is also possible to view this as a tactical move to start the relations of the new parliament with the West with a blank page. On the other hand, if the status of a delegate is viewed as a middle-rank bureaucrat's honorary appointment before retirement, the need to clear the space for a new batch of worthy loyal individuals seems only logical.

Results for the EU

Following tradition, the European Union has tied the review of the sanctions against Belarus to the elections, viewing them as some sort of test. However, it should be said, that Brussels puts too much weight on this spectacle, which, by itself, does not bear any indication about the intent (or lack thereof) of Minsk to improve the relations with the EU. Elections are the most dangerous and delicate period of life for any authoritarian regime, because it mobilises its proponents as well as opponents. It is therefore natural for the regime to strive for the highest efficiency in controlling this process. It is the reason for the increased repressions, the control over media and the omnipresence of propaganda. Consequently, all the conclusions about Belarus linked to the elections will be of negative nature and will call for the increase of the sanctions. This will lead to an ongoing freeze in the Euro-Belarusian relations.

Therefore, to gain a more adequate understanding of the situation in Belarus and its dynamics the European Union would benefit from developing a more nuanced approach, which would periodically evaluate various parameters of the system without being linked to the elections. Brussels could also lay out more transparent and clear criteria for including or removing individuals from the "black list", which could serve as an additional tool for stimulating positive changes in Belarus.

dzianis@belinstitute.eu

----

1 http://www.iiseps.org/press5.html
2 http://www.iiseps.org/press9.html

Research

In this section the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies presents a digest of its new studies, publications and expert opinions on the most burning issues of political, economic, and social life in Belarus.

The First Issue of BISS Political Media Barometer: Cooperation for Development

BISS has been monitoring the presence of Belarusian political forces in the media, the results of which are presented in the first issue of the BISS Political Media Barometer that covers the period of April-June' 2012. The researchers consciously chose not to present the results before the elections to escape potentially influencing the election campaigns. The major goal of the product is scientific analysis of the quality of political communication between the Belarusian democratic political forces and society, with an aim to contribute to its improvement.
This research serves not as a competitive ranking but rather as a 'reality-check' and tool to assess political communication, show good practice, and propose certain useful suggestions.

The first conclusion concerns both the context of existence of independent Belarusian political forces as well as their media strategy. Having few channels to reach society and the greater capacity of online to offline media inevitably pushes the Belarusian political forces to 'migrate' into the virtual space. The challenge for the democratic forces interested in mobilising the public is how to link activities in the virtual space with offline activities so as to be able to use the two spaces to build on each other rather than allowing the virtual space to dominate and create a sense of activism that only exists virtually.

In this instance it would be useful to address the electorate on issues that matter to them to reduce the effect of virtual existence. Political forces however communicate to their own insular audiences on issues of importance to technical experts. This conclusion is self-explanatory: the independent political forces may be interested in doing and hence reporting more work inside Belarus with the real people than the internal oppositional processes and their international activities. 94% of the opposition's media time references repressions and only 3% of publications mention economic related issues.

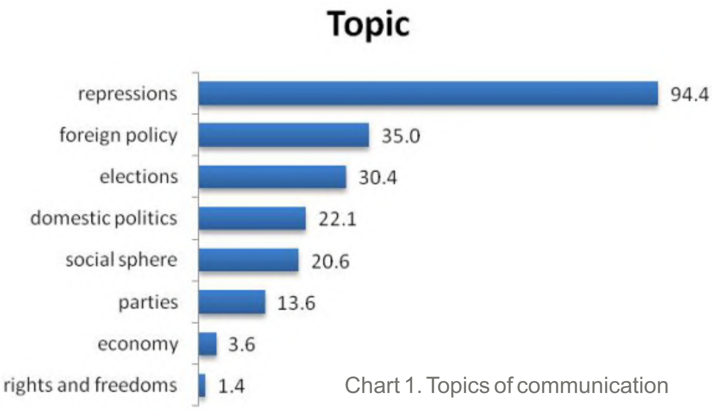


Chart 1. Topics of communication

Another way to represent themselves to the electorate is to make proposals and to promote initiatives which would be interesting for the citizens. However, research found that 29% of political communication of the opposition was proactive only in of messages. 31% of total mentions were due to media initiative to include a political force or politician in a story. The opposition would benefit from a more planned and proactive approach to media outreach.

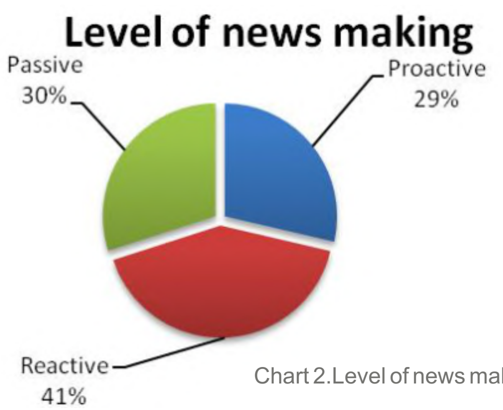


Chart 2.Level of news making

The data shows that quite often party leaders that dominate media attention do not always clearly define their roles and often appear in the media as bloggers, narrators or experts without explicit reference to their political force. The role of politicians presented in media is described in the following chart.



Chart 3.Type of mentioning

While presenting oneself as an expert may help to promote the individual involved, it does little to promote broader political groups and may lead to identity confusion on the side of public.

Another bottleneck of political communication in Belarus is that the diversity of representatives from the political forces in the independent media is rather poor. The diversification of characters, topics and the level of events (events at the regional level are under-represented: only 9.2% of the media appearances addressed regional problems) that would appear in media, could make them more attractive and hence give them more coverage for media and the audience.

To finish a short presentation of the result it would be interesting to show the timeline of audience coverage accumulation by individual politicians. The picks contribute to important events in political life such as release of A. Sannikau and D. Bandarenka in April. It brought to them an incredible growth of media appearance. But that dynamics shows that the main newsbreaks influencing on the presence in media isn't controlled by politicians themselves.

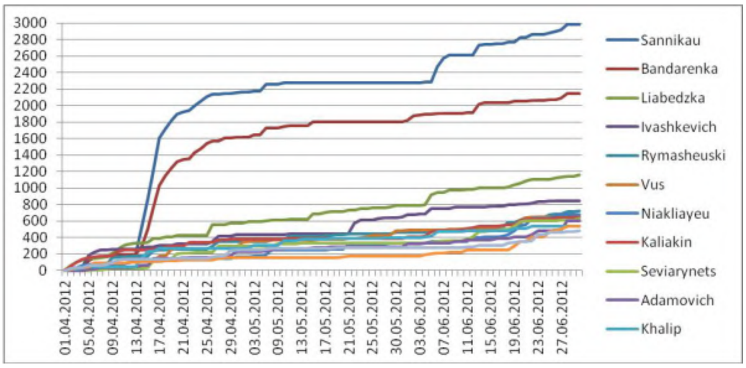


Chart 4. Accumulation of the 'Total presence' index (individual politicians)

Following its mission as an independent Belarusian think-tank BISS hopes that the report will be useful for improving political communication from the both political forces on the one hand and independent media on the other.

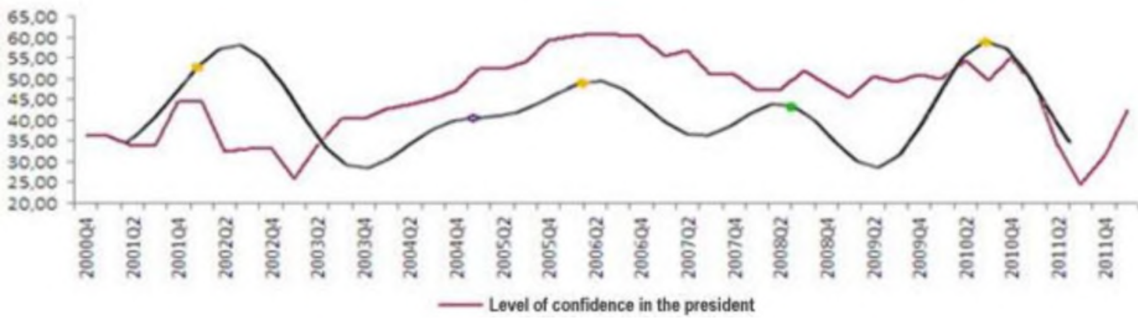
The full version of BISS Political Media Barometer #1 in Belarusian and English is available on BISS website.

Research

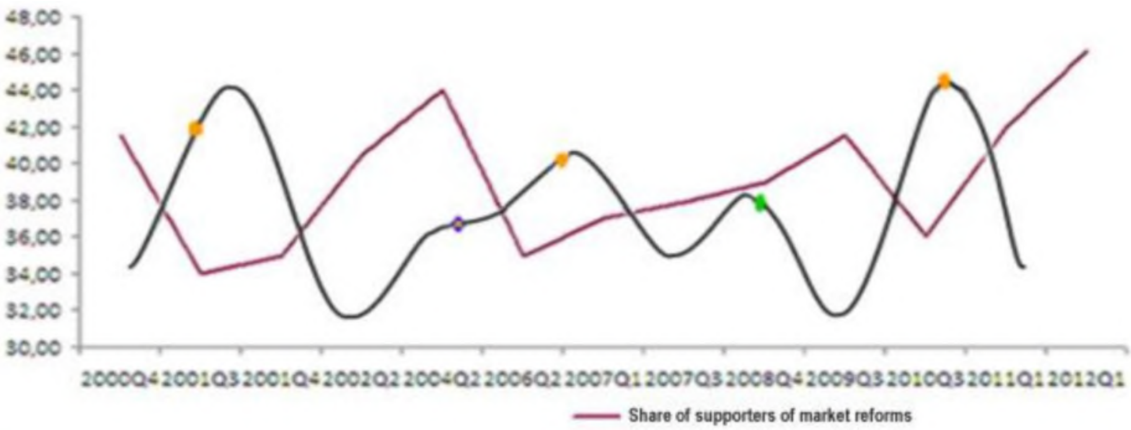
Political Business Cycle in Belarus or Political Economy of Trust in President

BISS research, released in September, investigates the question of what impact growth and real income have upon the levels of confidence in the incumbent president and attitudes to the centralised social system of the distribution of benefits. The research, based on statistical analysis of dynamics of trust levels towards the president, which is correlated to the pace of real income growth and attitudes to the economy with lower governmental intrusion, concludes with two main points.

1. The rate of growth in real incomes of the population has a direct influence on the president's credibility level: the faster compensations are pushed higher, the higher the level of trust in the incumbent, and the lower the pace at which wages grow, the lower the number of Lukashenka's supporters. This dependence by year is illustrated on the picture below, where black line marks pace of real income growth. Colored markers indicate date of elections in Belarus (both presidential and parliamentary, and also referendums).



2. The real wage growth rate shapes the "market" orientation of the Belarusians: the lower the pay rise rate, the bigger the number of those advocating an economy with a weaker state regulation. On the contrary, the faster real wages grow, the more citizens are willing to observe the "strong hand" of the state in the economy. Following the theses of Przeworski and Limongi, the authors of the research, argues that such a dependence impugn the probability of an emerging "demand for democratization" among Belarusian citizens while the authoritarian regime is able to provide further growth of real income. The interdependence of income growth pace and attitudes to market economy you can see on picture below (black line and colored markers notes the same elements as on the picture above).



BISS research indirectly confirms one of its earlier hypotheses that the reasons why Belarusians still support the political status quo are overall quite trivial and are mostly based on rational calculations; citizens can "wish" a market or a new president only at times when flows of material support from the state start running more slowly.

The full version of the study "Political business cycle in Belarus or political economy of trust in president" is available on the BISS website in Russian and English.

info@belinstitute.eu

ODB Current Activities Update Overview

By ODB, Brussels

In August- beginning of October, the Office for a Democratic Belarus (ODB) and its partner organisation in Minsk, the Office for European Expertise and Communication (OEEC), conducted a range of activities aimed at strengthening contacts and building the capacity of Belarusian civil society organisations. We continued the implementation of our expertise exchange programme 'EU and Belarus: Sharing Knowledge' by organising a second study visit of Belarusian experts on transport and transit to Lithuania and co-organising the international conference dedicated to improving public transportation in Belarus.

Contact Making Seminars and Information Meetings for Belarusian CSOs Take Place in Minsk



During contact-making seminar in Minsk. Photo by ODB

On 16 August, CSOs members from Belarus, EU and Eastern Partnership countries met in Minsk to discuss their activities in social, cultural, and education fields. The meeting was organised by the Office for European Expertise and Communication and Youth Educational Centre Fialta in the frames of the Clearing House initiative (CH).

Analysis of CSOs' activities and possibilities to start joint projects were the main points of the agenda. Guest speakers from Youth Centre Hyvärilä (Finland), Association 'People' (Ukraine), 'Spartacus' Platform (the Netherlands) and the Academy of Peace and Development (Georgia) shared their experience with the audience and presented their on-going projects.

These organisations mostly aim at supporting talented youth, as well as young people with disabilities by organising annual volunteer exchanges, seminars, workshops, and informal meetings that allow their participants exchange experience, to discover different cultures, and find solutions to some of the problems young people face in their everyday life. Guest speakers also offered insight into project management techniques and invited Belarusian NGOs for future cooperation.

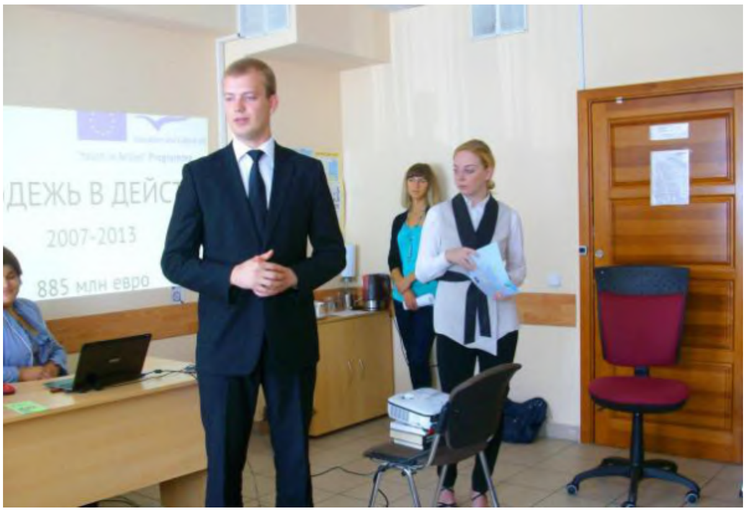


At the information meeting on the European programmes for Belarus. Photo by OEEC.by

On 22 August, the OEEC organised an information meeting for the organisations interested in cooperation in the spheres of science, culture, education and reform in the Eastern Partnership countries. This meeting was also held in the frames of the CH initiative.

During the meeting, major attention was drawn to the programmes suggested by the International Visegrad Fund that among its other activities facilitates and promotes the development of closer cooperation with the countries of Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and the South Caucasus through grant support of common cultural, scientific and educational projects.

The Clearing House consultants offered Belarusian civil society organisations a presentation about the programmes of the Fund, its open calls, application procedures and rules for selection of project proposals.



Ihar Horsky, Director of the European Council Information Centre in Belarus, during the information meeting under the Clearing House Project. Photo by OEEC.by

Another information meeting for Belarusian civil society organisations under the Clearing House Initiative took place at the beginning of September.

This time the Office of European Expertise and Communication facilitated a discussion about a joint initiative by the EU and the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe - 'Youth in Action'.

The organisers focused on priorities of the programme, project outlines and application procedures. One of the consultants trained under the Clearing House initiative informed the participants of the meetings about different programmes suggested by the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe.

Two invited representatives of the Council of Europe Information Centre in Belarus delivered a presentation about the goals of the Info Point and the possibilities it has to offer to Belarusian organisations.

Continued on page 11.

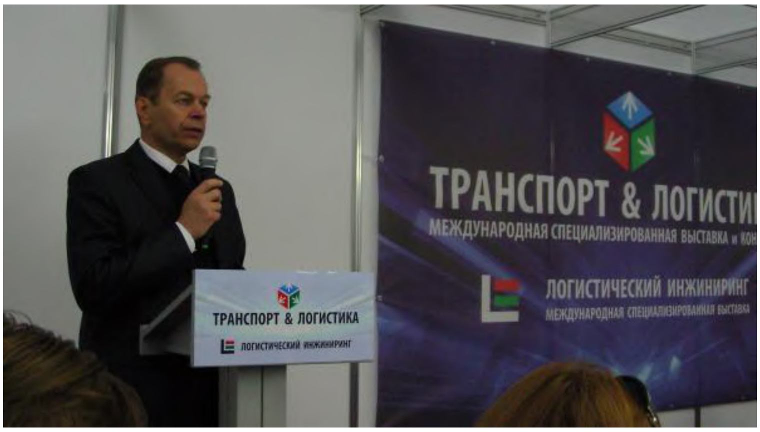
ODB Current Activities Update Overview

Belarusian Transport Experts Learn from Lithuanian Experience

By ODB, Brussels



During the mmeting with the President and Secretary General of LINAVA. Photo be OEEC.by/ODB



Uladzimir Sasnouski, Member of the Board of the Belarusian Union of Transpot Workers. Photo by BUTW

On 24-27 September, representatives of the Belarusian Union of Transport Workers (BUTW) travelled to Vilnius on a study tour organised by the Brussels-based Office for a Democratic Belarus in cooperation with the Office for European Expertise and Communication (Minsk, Belarus) in the frames of the project "EU and Belarus: Sharing Knowledge". The Lithuanian National Road Carriers' Association LINAVA hosted the event in Vilnius.

The programme of the visit was designed to help Belarusian experts get acquainted with passenger transportation in three different sectors: state-run, public, and commercial. Belarusian specialists were particularly interested in the way transport networks are organised in Lithuania, new legislative acts that regulate transport domain after the country joined the EU, as well as the possibility to apply the experience of their Lithuanian colleagues in Belarus which aims at approximation with the EU norms and standards in the area of transport and transit.

During the visit the Belarusian specialists had the opportunity to study the documents regulating passenger transportation in the EU in general and in particular in Lithuania. The Belarusian guests also visited the Ministry of Transport and Communications of Lithuania, the Lithuanian State Road Transport Inspectorate and Vilnius bus station.

One of the successes of the visit was signing an agreement between the Belarusian Union of Transport Workers and the Lithuanian National Road Carriers' Association LINAVA. Let us reiterate that a similar agreement was signed by BUTW with the Union of Transport and Road Workers of Moldova during their visit to Chișinău under the same project in April this year.

Ways to Improve Public Transportation in Belarus Discussed in Minsk

Following the visit of Belarusian experts to Vilnius, the Second National Conference, entitled "Public Transportation in the Republic of Belarus: current state and perspectives of development", took place in Minsk. The conference was held during the VI International Transport Congress on Transport and Logistics conducted by the Ministry of Transport and Communication. The Office for a Democratic Belarus and the Office for European Expertise and Communication were among the co-organisers of the event in the frames of the "EU and Belarus: Sharing Knowledge" project

The Conference brought together more than 80 delegates from all six regions of the country, including representatives of the local authorities, transport companies as well as vehicle manufacturers. The event was also attended by guests from Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Germany.
During the event more than 10 reports focusing on different aspects of public transportation ranging from the state policy to the challenges the local management of transport companies have to face in their everyday work were delivered.

Special attention was paid to the necessity of reforming the Belarusian legislation on passengers' transportation. Evgheni Stolovizki, from the Lithuanian National Road Carriers' Association LINAVA, who arrived in Minsk on a return visit, shared his experience in reform and spoke about the basic requirements of EU legislation in the field of passengers' transportation.

With the Ice Hockey World Championship to be organised in Minsk in 2014, the report by Mykolai Zhuk, head of Transport and Communications Department of the City Council of Lviv (Ukraine) received a lot of attention. In his speech, Mr. Zhuk focused on the steps that had been taken to optimise the transport routes and integrated traffic management in his home city ahead of the Euro 2012 Football Championship.

The presentations were followed by a debate, during which delegates could ask questions and share their concerns about the Belarusian public transportation system, as well as receive advice from their colleagues from EU and EaP countries.

The organisers of the conference believe that events of this kind fuel discussions about the need of the reform in Belarus' transport sector and help involving decision-makers in this process.

The "EU and Belarus: Sharing Knowledge" project envisages a series of events aimed at enhancing contacts and exchange of best practises between Belarusian specialists in different fields and their colleagues from the EU and other EaP countries. One of the expected results of this project is the elaboration of a concept on the harmonisation of legislation in the field of passengers' transportation by automobile transport.

The project is implemented by the Office for a Democratic Belarus (Brussels, Belgium) in cooperation with the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (Vilnius, Lithuania), the Belarusian Union of Transport Workers (Minsk, Belarus) with technical and informational support provided by the Office for European Expertise and Communication (Minsk, Belarus).

In November this year, ODB is planning to organise a second meeting of the Energy Club with the participation of the leading Belarusian and EU experts in Minsk. This particular session will be dedicated to the possibilities of improving the efficiency of Belarus' energy sector through suggesting better legal regulations. Energy efficiency and energy security is one of the topics that are covered by the 'EU and Belarus: Sharing Knowledge' initiative.

Most Popular on Belarus Digest

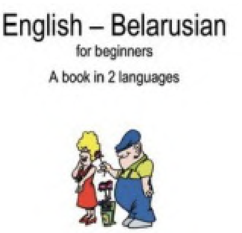
Prepared by Yaraslau Kryvoi, London

BelarusDigest



Belarusian Elections: The Art of Falsification

Ryhor Astapenia discusses the mechanism of election falsification in Belarus. He describes the process of selection of local election commission members, early voting procedures and the vote count. International observers are usually prevented from verifying whatever result the chairperson of the election commission announces. Belarusian democratic activists often call chairpersons magicians for such tricks. The only difference is that magicians pull rabbits out of their hats, while commission chairpersons pull out election results.



Belarusian Authorities Need English Lessons

The article discusses the fact that the level of English-friendliness in Belarus is far from what is expected in a modern European country. Belarusian officials have talked about attracting foreign investors and tourists for many years. But until recently virtually all Belarus street signs were only in Cyrillic script. In early September, the first ever signs in English appeared in the Minsk metro. In June, the first bilingual street signs appeared in the centre of the capital. Moreover, the knowledge of English among Belarusians remains low.



Elections without Winners

Ryhor Astapenia notes that the 2012 parliamentary election campaign ended in defeat of all political actors in Belarus. On the one hand, the Belarusian opposition was unable to mobilise society. On the other hand, the authorities received the expected results from a made up "political depression" which they themselves created – indeed, very few people turned up at the polling stations. One of the author’s observations is that today's opposition needs decisive and concrete actions, not just unity.



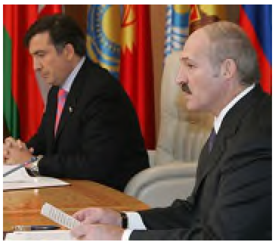
The Rise and Fall of Affordable Housing in Belarus

Darya Firsava tracks the history of housing subsidies in Belarus. Whether you arrive in Minsk from the airport, bus or railway station, one of the first things you notice is abundant construction. The article explains why and how the authorities supported the housing boom. It also analyses why they have to scale down the subsidies.



Who is in the New Belarusian Parliament?

This article discusses the newly “elected” Belarusian MPs. A typical MP is a non-partisan male aged between 50 and 60. He made his career in the state sector - either working for government institutions or in education, culture, science or health care sectors. A labour collective usually nominates such a candidate. To become a member of parliament one also needs to have a good record of political loyalty towards the regime.



Lukashenka's Anti-Russian Alliance with Georgia Under Threat

Siarhei Bohdan writes that Lukashenka lost one of his most important allies. Georgian leader Mikhail Saakashvili lost parliamentary elections and is switching to the opposition. Belarusian ruler expressed his admiration for Saakashvili who showed he was willing to give up power. Saakashvili has been an important channel through which the Belarusian government has communicated with the West.



Dazhynki Festival: Belarusian Tradition or Lukashenka's Propaganda?

This article describes the most important agricultural festival in Belarus endorsed by the state. It concludes that the main problem of Belarusian agriculture is the lack of reforms and nearly complete dominance of state management. Today rural Belarus has not improved much in comparison with that of the former Soviet Union. Private investorsremain a rarity in Belarusian villages. Rather than seriously dealing with these problems Belarusian authorities prefer to organise expensive political shows to create the appearance of wellbeing.

kryvoi@belarusdigest.com

The Bear of Belarus

By Maryna Rakhlei, Berlin

Alexander Medved' ('the Bear') was born in 1937 in the Kiev region of Soviet Ukraine, in the village of Belaya Tserkov', where his family had come from when it was within the Russian empire. It is believed that his telling last name used to be the nickname of the relatives. Medved's grandmother was called a she-bear by the neighbours not without a reason: 45 was the size of her shoes, 192 cm was her height; and his grandfather was even taller.

The future athlete grew up working in forestry in difficult post-war conditions, from an early age helping his father-forester: ploughing, sowing, mowing; he carried water, chopped wood and brought home wildfowl for the hunters. His inherited figure only added to qualities that made him a champion: honesty, the ability to work and work hard, and the ambition to achieve the best results.

In 1954, the Bear found work in an aircraft factory as a fitter, and stayed there until he was drafted into the army. In 1956 he was called to serve in the tank division of the Belarusian Military District. As a schoolboy, Medved' tried different sports: gymnastics, basketball, volleyball, track and field. He competed for his military unit in hammer throwing and played handball. But all this was only until he got completely captivated by wrestling.

As Alexander explained, in team sports you are responsible for everyone and everyone is responsible for you; but a wrestler is alone on the battle grounds, responsible only for himself.



Two bears

Medved' barely mastered good techniques and got acquainted with basic tactics, and still managed to win the Belarusian Military District championship. He had a go at freestyle and classical wrestling as well as sambo. Not yet able to choose his favourite sport, these experiences gave him a taste for competition. After demobilisation Alexander remained in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, graduated from the High School for Coaches and started a course at Minsk Institute of Physical Education.

In 1957, Medved' met his mentor - Pavel Grigoriev. In 1961, their tandem was joined by Honoured Trainer of the USSR Baliaslau Rybalka. That same year Alexander Medved' won his first gold in the Soviet Union Championship and became a heavyweight champion and a world bronze medallist.
In the early 1960s, there was another talented heavyweight, Alexander Ivanitsky. He was almost the same age as The Bear, his main competitor in the championship selections and ...a true friend outside the ring. Both wrestlers were honest and demanding of themselves. Their battles usually ended in a draw and the gold medal in the USSR championships was won by one then the other in turn. The Soviet team had to decide who would compete in the middle weight category? The USSR team had two Alexanders, two heavyweights who aimed at the gold. And Medved' decided to lose weight and move to another category. He continued to lose and put on weight until 1966. As Ivanitsky finished his career, he finally returned to fight among the heavyweights.

Getting his first Olympic medal in 1964 in Japan was not easy for The Bear. Such a superiority over his rivals almost backfired on him. Even before entering the ring in the finals, he was sure of his victory seeing the opponent was not in good shape. Getting comprehensively beaten him, the Bear learnt his lesson: Always respect your opponent. He remembered this rule until his very last fight.



Medved' in Staiki, 1972.

The XIX Olympic Games in 1968 wasn't a piece of cake either. Mexico City, with its thin air due to the high-altitude scared many off from participating. It is actually little known that Medved' fell seriously ill there. His blood pressure rose so dramatically that his coach contemplated withdrawing him from the competition. But Alexander insisted that he would be able to wrestle. To demoralise his rivals, he walked with his head up, always cheerful and smiling. While in the locker room he would now and then lose consciousness, then doctors would help him to recover so that half an hour later he could be in the ring ... and then usually would be the first to make a move, at his opponent.

At the Olympic Games in 1968 Medved' fought in the heavy weight category. His main rival was a German called Wilfried Dietrich, who successfully competed in freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling. They tried to make a grip on each other as a sudden crunch came – one of the Bear's fingers unnaturally stuck out to the side. That might have been the end of the battle.

Alexander spoke about it afterwards: "They wanted to call a doctor for me. I thought, "I will go, they will remove me, and that will



Alexander Medved' and Alexander Ivanitsky

Unknown-Belarus Famous Belarusians of the World

The Bear of Belarus

By Maryna Rakhlei, Berlin



Alexander Medved' now. Photo by AIF.by

be the end of my Olympic Games. So I took the finger and put it back in place. Dietrich and the judge looked at me with wide eyes. I said "OK" and went back to the ring. As I pressed him to the edge, the German raised his hand and asked to call a doctor".

Dietrich broke down. Medved' won this gold medal through his bear-like will power: a feat it seemed no human was capable of.

This constant strain, and work at his limits did not pass unnoticed. The Soviet wrestler had cardiovascular problems: high blood pressure. Doctors believed that he was out of great sport. Although it was clear that Olympic Games of 1972 would anyway be the last for him, Alexander came up to the scratch in his best shape. He became the first wrestler to hold the flag of the USSR at the opening of the Olympic Games. An honour previously only given to weightlifters. Expectations were high that Medved' would get a third gold medal in a row.

Against the background of political confrontation between the Soviet Union and the U.S., the fight between the 114 kg athlete from Minsk and 190 kg American Chris Taylor was one of the most anticipated events in Munich. It took the Bear two rounds to exhaust the American giant. As he was getting tired, he knocked him to the mat and won by one point. But this victory was costly for Medved', who needed injections in the final to lessen the pain, although ultimately managing to win.

With his last fight over, the then three-time Olympic champion stepped into the middle of the room, went down on his knees and kissed the rug, and so symbolically ending his career.

Medved' admits that it was impossible to believe that a wrestler could show his best results for 12 years, during three consecutive Olympic Games. He explains his success with Belarusian modesty, saying that anything is possible, if one goes slowly, step by step, works hard every day and so gets the universe to help you.

As Alexander explained, "As I went out into the ring, I enjoyed it". He liked to move, polish techniques to become like instinct. He would win over an opponent, for example, who would come up afterwards and say, "Show me how you do that?" –He says the champions who met in the most elite fights were often the same people who become your friends outside the wrestling mat.

The Bear's practice of using every minute wisely helped him to live a full life even as his sports career came to an end. He worked as a coach, taught at universities and the headed Belarusian Wrestling Federation. Since 1970, in Minsk, the international tournament in freestyle and women's wrestling awards Alexander Medved' prizes, and he has helped with the opening of a new youth sports centre.

Today Medved' is Vice-President of the National Olympic Committee of Belarus. He is only vice because the Belarusian president heads the committee: there is no athlete worthy of a post higher than the Bear.

Belarusians know this unique wrestler as a modest and approachable man; he doesn't believe he is a star, knows how to work, and how to both win and lose. They also know one other of his secrets: is his family, which has supported him through the years; his wife, children, and now grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Could it be a coincidence that Medved' Bear chose to stay in Minsk? He was destined to be a fighter and a winner. And a Belarusian.

info@democraticbelarus.eu

In Fact

Olga Korbut (Volha Korbut) is a famous Belarusian gymnast and four-time Olympic Champion. She was the first one to develop and perform an unusual, daring flip that later was named after her. These back flips-to-catch on the uneven bars were the first release move ever achieved on the apparatus. Today gymnasts are not allowed to perform the flip which is considered to be extremely dangerous. Her popularity created a wave of interest in gymnastics in the US: American girls wanted to enrol in gymnastics schools, which opened in every State; hundreds of them were named after Korbut. Today Olga lives in Scottsdale (Arizona) and heads Olga Korbut Gymnastics Academy.

Ruslan Salei (Rusty) was the legend of Belarusian ice hockey. He was the captain of the Belarusian national team but also Rusty, who played 14 seasons in the National Hockey League (NHL) in the US participating in 917 NHL games and getting 204 scores. After his tragic death in September 2011, the Belarusian Federation of Ice Hockey withdrew number 24 under which Salei played symbolically securing it for him forever.

Belarus Headlines is a joint project of the Office for Democratic Belarus, Belarus Digest and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. More information about these organisations can be found on their web pages.

Opinions expressed in Belarus Headlines do not necessarily represent the views of the editors.